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SUBJECT: ARMENIA'S OPPONENTS TO PROTOCOLS RATCHET UP THEIR RHETORIC

REF: A. YEREVAN 638
1B. YEREVAN 623
1C. YEREVAN 622
1D. YEREVAN 617
1E. YEREVAN 611
1F. YEREVAN 610

Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Less than two weeks before Armenia's and Turkey's foreign ministers are to sign their agreed protocols to establish bilateral relations, domestic and Diaspora opponents of President Sargsian's rapprochement policy are ratcheting up their rhetoric against the protocols and the President. As has been the case since April 22 when Turkey and Armenia declared their intentions to pursue a roadmap to normalize relations, the most vocal critics include the Armenian Revolutionary Federation - Dashnaksutun (Dashnaks), ex-foreign minister Vartan Oskanian, and Armenia's Diaspora. The Dashnaks warned Sargsian that his hold on power could be at stake if he proceeds with the protocols as drafted. Oskanian roundly slammed the protocols and authorities' handling of the domestic debate as "unforgivable, insulting, and dangerous." And the Diaspora reminded authorities that "genocide" recognition should transcend and not be sacrificed for any immediate diplomatic consideration. END SUMMARY.

DASHNAKS WARN SARGSIAN, INSIST ON CHANGES TO PROTOCOLS

12. (SBU) On September 16, Hrant Markarian, the de facto head of the nationalist and newly opposition Armenian Revolutionary Federation - Dashnaksutun (Dashnaks) party issued a warning to President Sargsian that he could fall from power if he proceeded with the signing of the protocols with Turkey. Markarian added, "you must not cut the tree branch on which you are sitting." Markarian said that a deal concluded with Turkey based on the existing terms of the protocols could be the last straw for a public increasingly dissatisfied with Sargsian's government, stating that "the people would sooner or later hold him accountable, and the price would be heavy." In spite of Markarian's stark warnings to the President, the Dashnaks have yet to call for his resignation, opting for now only to call for the resignation of the foreign minister.

13. (SBU) On September 15, the Dashnaks launched protest actions they had previewed earlier in the week. Approximately 50 Dashnak members (a number designed to keep below the 100-person limit when permission must be sought for

a demonstration) camped outside the Prime Minister's office building located in Republic Square, erecting banners that read "NO to preconditions" in English. The participants can be rowdy, with some shouting "traitor" whenever the Foreign Minister appears. Two dozen other Dashnaks began a collective hunger strike outside the nearby foreign ministry building. The Dashnaks said the hunger strike would be a symbolic one, with members taking turns in refusing food for two days. Security has been accordingly beefed-up.

¶4. (SBU) On September 14, the Dashnaks issued a statement that read: "We do not object to the policy of establishing relations and opening the border with Turkey, but we say no the preconditions trampling on the rights of future generations and threatening the security of our state and people. We insist on making drastic changes in the protocols." The Dashnak sit-ins are continuing around-the-clock, and the party claims it has collected over 40,000 signatures from passers-by. The Dashnaks are organizing a large demonstration on September 30, one day before the October 1 parliamentary debate.

¶5. (C) In a September 15 discussion with the DCM, Giro Manoyan, head of the Dashnaks' Hay Dat (Armenian Cause) Department, fumed that the president "will pay a price" if he proceeds with the protocols as drafted and gets parliament to support him. When the DCM asked what kind of price Sargsian would have to pay, and whether it was a political one, Manoyan paused but, rather ominously, declined to respond. In a separate conversation with the Ambassador the following day, FM Nalbandian expressed concerns about his physical security, something we had not heard from him for months.

EX-FM OSKANIAN SLAMS PROTOCOLS AS "UNFORGIVABLE"

¶6. (SBU) On September 8, Vartan Oskanian, Armenia's foreign minister from 1998-2009 and currently the director of the Yerevan-based Civilitas Foundation think tank, published a bitter critique of the protocols entitled "Getting This Wrong Will Be Unforgivable." Oskanian first slammed the authorities' handling of the domestic debate on the protocols, sniping that it is "hugely insulting that high-level officials can be this dismissive and trivializing on a matter that is so critical for our people." Oskanian then slammed the Armenian government for the "badly formulated" protocols, arguing that rapprochement has been negotiated "poorly and dangerously," and that "it is irresponsible of our government to force our people to make such choices about our present and future." Oskanian directed his ire in particular at the government's alleged betrayal of Armenian territorial claims and willingness to set aside demands for genocide recognition. Oskanian has made numerous public appearances and hosted a discussion on September 22 where he vigorously pursued the same themes.

HERITAGE CONTINUES TO CALL FOR REFERENDUM

¶7. (SBU) Leaders of the opposition Heritage Party, which holds just seven seats in the 131-member parliament, continued their calls to submit any agreement with Turkey to a national referendum. Heritage also said the referendum should be accompanied by a vote of confidence in President Sargsian. In response to these demands, PM Sargsian replied during a September 16 question-and-answer session with MPs that it was "premature" to consider a referendum as the president was carrying out his foreign policy initiative. The opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC) is generally positive about rapprochement, with the exception of the provision for a historical committee. However, the ANC is taking a back seat on the issue, with many assuming that ANC Levon Ter-Petrossian hopes that Sargsian will make a fatal error that he can use to his advantage.

FM NALBANDIAN TELLS PARLIAMENT PROTOCOLS CAN'T BE ALTERED

¶18. (SBU) On September 16, Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian told a session of parliament that the protocols on establishing and developing relations between Armenia and Turkey cannot be changed. Dashnak leader Vahan Hovhannessian protested that the six weeks devoted by Turkey's and Armenia's governments were not, as described, intended for public discussions, but rather for the publics to "become informed," with it now clear to him that the Armenia's parliament would have no way to propose changes to the protocols. (NOTE: The Dashnaks' disappointment on this point has not prevented them from producing and distributing a booklet proposing detailed changes to virtually every provision in the two documents. END NOTE.)

PRESIDENT'S POLITICAL CONSULTATIONS

¶19. (SBU) On September 17, President Sargsian and FM Nalbandian held five-hour-long political consultations to discuss the protocols with approximately 52 leaders of political parties he had invited on September 14. The President characterized the meeting as "extremely difficult."

The opposition led by the Armenian National Congress boycotted the consultations, deriding them as a farce. According to the presidency, all 50 or so leaders had the opportunity to present their views on the protocols. According to reports, the talks "deepened" Dashnak concerns over rapprochement." Armen Rustamian, a representative on the Dashnaks' Supreme Body, told reporters after the consultations that "we continue to state that the documents (protocols) convey preconditions. Moreover, we state that after the protocols are ratified, Armenian-Turkish rapprochement will be determined in favor of Turkey."

DIASPORA CHIMES IN

¶10. (C) The largest, most vocal, best-organized, and most well-funded Armenian-American, the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) has made its strong opposition to the protocols well known. "Genocide" recognition is the first priority for the ANCA, and it has relentlessly campaigned against normalization on the grounds that it would undercut efforts aimed at achieving "genocide" recognition. Although previously more passive (and more moderate), the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA), and the Eastern and Western Diocese Church of America wrote a joint letter to President Obama that forthrightly said "we support normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey without preconditions." Adhering closely to GOAM policy, the letter also indicated concerns about Turkish intentions and the importance of Turkey-Armenia n (###)egotiations.

Hayrapetian is quoted as saying, "In my view, the Diaspora has no right to interfere in Armenia's internal affairs. If they want to interfere, they should move here, become citizens of Armenia and share our yoke."

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Despite the sound and fury coming from some quarters, a clear-eyed assessment of the protocols' parliamentary prospects indicates Sargsian has the votes for ratification (ref C). Some opposition figures privately acknowledge as much (septel). Still, the GOAM leadership does seem unsettled. In part, this may reflect a recognition that, despite repeated public insistence to the contrary, Turkey-Armenia rapprochement is related to Nagorno-Karabakh -- an area where a Sargsian misstep actually could threaten his hold on power (ref H). Also, given the history of extreme Armenian nationalists using violence as a form of

political action, Sargsian may be harboring some anxieties about his own physical security. The fact that, on the day of the parliamentary hearings October 1, Sargsian is setting out on a Diaspora road show to visit Armenian communities in Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Beirut, and Rostov-on-Don is also telling (or at least symbolic). To the President, parliamentary processes represent mere formalities, and domestic criticism can be overcome with the help of state-controlled media and the security services. The dissatisfaction of large segments of the Diaspora and the possible withdrawal of its support, however, represents a greater and less controllable threat. It will be key during his outreach abroad for the President to invigorate the "silent majority" of diasporans who support normalization and sideline his more vocal critics.

PENNINGTON